

# Lower East Suicide

the poetry of  
Anna Margolin



translated from the Yiddish by  
Mildred Faintly

Copyright 2023 Mildred Faintly.

All rights reserved. This book may be freely shared and reproduced for any non-commercial purpose.

*Thought is free, books should be too.*

# Table of Contents

Introduction

## Lower East Suicide

Roots

*A young man still . . .*

*Mother earth . . .*

Portrait

The Ages of Woman

In the Street

My People Speak

City by the Sea

My Home

I'm Your Refuge, I'm Your Sword

*We went through the days . . .*

Painfully Shy

*Slowly, glowingly . . .*

Be Kind

You

*Sleep, my love . . .*

Blue Violin

*. . . or be they gold . . .*

Wordless Things

*I hold your dear head . . .*

*A silence . . .*

*I thought I heard your step . . .*

*. . . so far away . . .*

Happiness

From a Letter not Sent

*I walk in the shadows . . .*  
Song  
*You kissed my hand . . .*  
Nothing at All.  
Ur-Murderess Night  
*When I walk with my lover . . .*  
*The streets appeared empty . . .*  
*Don't suppose I've altered . . .*  
*The road is really soundless*  
*I didn't even know . . .*  
*Like my eyes . . .*  
*The golden peacock's flown . . .*

## My Lips Are Sealed

Demons  
From My Darkness  
*This is night . . .*  
*Slender ships . . .*  
Hush Now  
A Veil  
Devils  
Night  
Tired  
Insomnia  
You Are  
Hard Heart  
Draft for an Epitaph  
*Words to engrave . . .*

## Sun, Pavement, Ways

*In the rich keen colors . . .*  
*Now the brown roofs . . .*  
Evening

The Sun

*The sadness of all that is . . .*

Rain

Lily

To a Girl

Best-Litovsk

Odessa

Not Happy

At the Café

Girls in Crotona Park, the Bronx

Dusk on Fifth Avenue

Broadway Evening

The Gates of Hell

Tinted Windows

A Song of Pride

The Masquerade Is Over

Reuben Ludwig

*In the sand . . .*

One Single Poem

For Franz Werfel

The Wall

## Mary

*What do you want, Mary?*

Mary's Prayer

Mary and the Priest

Lonely Mary

Mary and the Guests

Mary Wants to Become a Beggar

Mary and Death

## Images

A Human Being  
Madwoman  
Gangster  
In the Dark Room  
The Maiden Says  
A Girl's Song  
What a Woman Says  
*Entr'acte*  
On a Balcony  
My Venus  
Forgotten Gods  
Her Smile  
Under Chinese Lanterns  
Messenger of Sorrow

## Last Words

The Bridge  
His Side of the Story  
Evening in the Park  
*My days are like the roots . . .*  
*I accept whatever . . .*  
*What did I really want?*  
Epitaph

# Introduction

## “She Writes Like a Man.”

When Anna Margolin’s poems first appeared in the Yiddish press in 1917, the general opinion among the literati was that they must have been written by a man.

This wasn’t a matter of misogyny. At the time, in the progressive and largely Socialist world of Yiddish publishing, writing by women was enthusiastically received—so much so, that many male poets adopted female pseudonyms to improve their publication rate.

The assumption wasn’t that a woman couldn’t have written that well. Rather, the writers who held court in the cafés of the Lower East Side perceived, astutely, that there was something *masculine* in this author’s style and stance.

This clue was soon lost. Although Margolin has been appreciated by Jewish feminists, her lesbianism, unambiguously expressed in her poetry, has been primly and consistently overlooked.

## The Yiddish Renaissance

Yiddish went from being little more than a spoken patois, to a major world-literary medium, to extinction, in the hundred years from 1850 to 1950.

In the late nineteenth century, when Europe began granting them civil rights, the Jews enthusiastically entered the modern world, and Yiddish, rather than Hebrew, became the language of their most advanced thought. This was also the golden age of print. Newspapers flourished as never before or since; there was high demand and good pay for writers in Yiddish.

At the same time, antisemitic violence escalated dramatically in Russia, where the Jews were scapegoated in the final self-destructive years of the Czarist government. This drove huge numbers of Jews to New York, where the Lower East Side hosted a literary renaissance.

We needn't go into the complexities of the numerous and stridently self-defined poetic movements there—they disagreed among themselves as much as with each other. But all of them can be accurately described as modernist. Anna Margolin's poetry especially doesn't fit in with any of the labeled schools—it is unique, and towers above the work of her contemporaries.

## Symbolist, Expressionist, Feminist

Margolin programmatically defines her aesthetic in the *Words to Engrave*,

And I swear  
by Else Lasker-Schüler,  
by Rilke and by Baudelaire,  
that I'll say nothing rather than whine.

Margolin is Baudelairean in her elegant pessimism and lapidary clarity. Though her poetry is sometimes concise to the point of being cryptic, careful reading always reveals deliberate meaning and well-formed ideas.

Margolin's poetic language is also firmly in the tradition of Rilke—the final refinement of Romanticism into Expressionism, through which the modern world begins to fitfully gleam.

Else Lasker-Schüler richly deserves the first place Margolin accords her. The greatest woman poet in German literature, her first book, *Styx*, began—and in some ways completed—the venture of Expressionist poetry.

Margolin writes *as a woman*. Many of her themes are quite gender specific. She narrates her exasperation and humiliation as she realizes a married man she's involved won't leave his wife after all. From the perspective of a beauty whose best days are behind her, she bitterly considers the good looks of vapid younger women. She feels guilt over the child she abandoned. And everywhere she describes her *emotions* with a hallucinatory vividness, giving them a visual reality, with is not to be met with among men—who typically



express deepest feeling through eloquent brevity and force of oratory.

Margolin writes, in an undated note found among her papers,

If I have borrowed from anyone, it was not from men—never—only from women. And if my work gives signs of other minds, other hearts—these are the minds and hearts of women I have encountered. I never forgot them, they are always in my thoughts.

But she also has a very male side. In the first lines of her book's opening poem she speaks in the voice of a male homosexual. Indeed, in her relations with men there is a masculine, commanding quality. The only man she kept was the submissive, cringing wife-like Iceland, the caretaker and companion of her last thirty years.

And then there are the unambiguously lesbian poems,

## The Premature Burial

Anna Margolin (1887-1952), was born Rosa Lebensboym, in Brest (formerly Brest-Litovsk) in Belarus—a landlocked Eastern European country, squeezed between Russia and Poland. Her father, Menakhem Lebensboym, was a grain merchant with a bad head for business. He sported a neat little Van Dyke beard, wore clothing of fashionable Western European cut, and liked the ladies. When he did condescend to speak Yiddish he “corrected” it heavily in the direction of German. Business kept him in Königsburg or Warsaw for most of the year. He returned home for a few weeks around Passover in the spring, and again around the high holy days in September.

Anna's mother Dvoyre Leye, was a plain-looking, pious country girl whose father had plenty of money. Menakhem Lebensboym had married her, largely inspired by her enormous dowry, and planned to impart to her some of his own urban sophistication—playing the male chauvinist Pygmalion. She always felt in every way his inferior, and treated him with worshipful servility, to which he responded with gratified scorn.

Anna, their brilliant only child, whom her father took care to have tutored to fluency in Hebrew and Russian, learned to share her father's contempt for her mother, whom she bullied in her father's absence. She physically matured early on into a strikingly beautiful girl, and was soon practicing her powers on the local boys, whom she toyed with cruelly.

In 1906, when she was eighteen, one of these flirtations took a serious turn, and her father sent her to stay with a wealthy aunt in New York. Anna was supposed to enroll at university, but instead discovered the literary world of the Lower East Side, where she situated herself to advantage by becoming the lover of Chaim Zhitlowsky, a political author and popular lecturer her father's age.

Bored at last by his devotion and his demands, Anna returned to Europe. Her socialist friends provided her with an introduction to the anarchist Prince Kropotkin in London, and there she stayed for a few weeks enjoying the elite exile community, before going on to Warsaw, where she made herself at home in the salon of Y. L. Peretz, a Yiddish writer whose stature is comparable to that of Sholem Aleichem. There she met the writer Moshe Starsky, whom she married, and with whom she moved to Palestine, where she bore him a son, Naaman. After two years she abandoned her family in the Holy Land—she never saw them again—and sought her father in Warsaw.

Her father had in the meantime divorced Anna's mother and married a wealthy woman, who didn't care to have a beautiful, willful stepdaughter as an indefinite-term houseguest. Her father, who had provided an ample dowry and footed the expenses for the move to Palestine, felt his responsibilities to her were at an end. Finally, Anna's mother, ever generous and self-sacrificing, took her in, and somehow scraped together the cost of her return to America.

There Margolin worked as a journalist for the Yiddish newspaper *Der Tog*, "The Daily," soon became a member of the editorial board, and wrote a popular fashion column "In the Women's World."

In 1917 She married the writer Hirsh Leyb Gordon, five years her junior, who later became a psychiatrist. She lived with him in New

Haven, Connecticut, and began, in 1919, an affair with the writer Reuben Iceland, also married at the time. It was then that she adopted the pen-name Anna Margolin, under which her poems appeared.

Her only book, *Lider*, "Poems," appeared in 1929. Though it made little stir in New York, it created a small sensation in Europe, where it was praised by Chaim Nachman Bialik (who, when he turned from Yiddish to Hebrew as the medium of his poetry, became the Pushkin of modern Israel).

Over the next three years Margolin published a few more poems in journals, which we present here under the title "Last Words." She blackmailed her adulterous lover, Reuben Iceland, into divorcing his wife by threatening suicide. With him as her devoted custodian, she gradually became a recluse. She continued to write, but not to publish. It would not be melodramatic to call her renunciation a suicide—in fact the phrase Poe's story made famous, "premature burial," would be even more apt. Her last published poem was her own epitaph.

## Lesbian

After her death, Iceland, in compliance with her final wishes, destroyed her poetry manuscripts—condensing years of accumulated resentment into one act of hypocritical over-obedience.

The outline of her life given here suggests that any relationship with Anna Margolin was "high maintenance." It seems that she identified with her father, despised her mother, and re-enacted their family drama, with herself in the father's role, with all her successive lovers.

Her identification with her father was likely a factor in the attraction to women she attests in her poems. Whether a long-term relationship with a woman would have proven more successful than those she had with men is an open question.

But not one we need answer here. The psychological truth that concerns us here is that gender ambiguity, and male identification, was very much a part of who Anna Margolin was.

The clearly articulated lesbian content of this book will be found in the poem *To a Girl* in the section “Sun, Pavement, Ways,” and most significantly in the cycle, *On a Balcony, My Venus, Forgotten Gods* and *Her Smile* in the penultimate section, “Images.” The depth and genuineness of the feelings expressed are underscored by the adjacent poems expressing disgust with her husband, particularly in *Under Chinese Lanterns*. In “Last Words,” the poems printed in magazines after her one book had appeared, the poem *Evening in the Park* sets forth the tension she felt between a marriage she hated and a woman she loved. Her decision in favor of the former is probably our best clue about her virtual suicide.

## A Transgender Translation

The absolute value of a literary work is of course not gender-specific. But men and women see the world differently in a number of ways, some of them quite significant. Anna Margolin has certain special resonances which a male translator may not appreciate.

As a transgender translator, I hope to bring a new and not uninteresting perspective. Though I will never have the intuitive understanding of women that a woman born anatomically female would possess, I may have compensatory insights—just as a naturalized foreigner sometimes notes vital features of a nation’s character which are unnoticed, even nameless, for that land’s native inhabitants. And an illegal immigrant will get some especially unsuspected glimpses of what a country is *really* like.

Margolin often writes of her conflicted relationships with men. I possess, unwished for, an immediate understanding of male attitudes, particularly since I was taken to task whenever I failed to manifest them. When I find these masculinities described through a woman’s eyes, I can corroborate. And I can explain, with unsparing clarity, many seeming riddles of male behavior, whose dispiriting solution could elude the most cynical and disenchanting of women.

On an even more personal note, as a marginalized, ostracized, feminine boy, I turned to books with a passion which, under happier circumstances, I would have brought to bear upon substantial and

lived existence. The texts of dead authors have been my world for most of my life: they live for me to a singular, possibly unwholesome degree. Thus my method of translation is nearly Ouija.

Too, my longing for a womanhood which nature denied me leads me to live *through* poets like Anna Margolin, with a desperate intensity no woman whose femaleness was physical as well as metaphysical would need to feel.

And so I come to these poems from a number of less usual angles. What I have learned about being a woman, and indeed of poetry, I had to teach myself secretly and without assistance. No doubt, like any autodidact, I have surprising depths of knowledge alongside equally unexpected gaps.

But my task here is not the (for me) impossible one of unambiguously being a woman, or of being Anna Margolin, but of representing her (as an actor would) with the requisite depth and authenticity to make *her* real in English.

Perhaps not so difficult a task. Anna Margolin is merciless in her self-disclosure. There's not much about herself she doesn't say plainly. The only thing she won't show is weakness.

## Further Reading

Our only primary sources for Anna Margolin are her poems, competently translated into English by Shirley Kumove under the title *Drunk from the Bitter Truth*, though the lesbian content has been airbrushed out. Her lover, Reuben Iceland's, account of her in his literary memoir *From Our Springtime*, is the only full and firsthand, if somewhat aggrieved, account of her life. Daniel Kennedy's excellent recent translation of several of her stories, *During Sleepless Nights*, has wonderful descriptions of the world she grew up in, and the relationships in her stories amplify the insights offered here. *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse* provides an excellent introduction to the world of Yiddish poetry.

Margolin's papers, and her writings from the Yiddish press, are not yet available outside of archives, and a biography of Margolin has not yet been written.

this translation is dedicated to

**Michael Shapiro**

translator of Moshe Nadir,  
who introduced me to Anna Margolin,  
my most loyal friend  
from the time I was a boy.





# Lower East Suicide



# Roots



*A young man still . . .*

A young man still, I listened  
to Socrates in the pillared city center.  
My best friend was also my lover.  
He had the most perfect torso in Athens.

I was Caesar, the last of my line.  
In a world built anew from polished marble,  
I selected as my only fitting bride  
my own arrogant sister.

Crowned with roses,  
I drank wine far into the night,  
listening, with lordly indifference,  
to implausible tales of miracles and such  
in some little village in Judea.

*Mother earth . . .*

Mother earth, down-trodden, sun-beaten,  
dark slave, dark mistress,  
that's who I am, my love.  
Out of sad, humiliated me,  
you rear your powerful trunk.

In a long, dumb silence,  
like that of the eternal stars  
or the lamp of the day,  
I circle over you, your roots, your boughs,  
half-awake, half in dream,  
seeking my heaven and my height through you.

## Portrait

Because of bad luck, because she'd been laughed at,  
her soul learned to glow  
like metal heated orange;  
she learned to hold her head high  
as though God had chosen her  
for some sublime and secret purpose.

In the empty house she peered at her image  
in the mirror, intently as one who attempts  
to make out some shape through silver, heavy rain.

Carefully as if everyone who knew her  
watched, she solemnly approached herself,  
like someone being presented to a queen,  
with perfect calm, formal, correct,  
maintaining, in her distrust,  
her masking, impenetrable expression,  
even though there was no one there.

When the kindly evening hours  
bent down to shelter her, to shelter everything,  
with the gentle sorrow of darkness,  
all she felt  
was the dull banked fire of madness  
inside her, repressed,  
though it choked her.

## The Ages of Woman

Women who have loved much  
and still haven't had enough,  
they go through life with laughter or rage  
shining in their eyes, bright and cold  
as polished agate—  
that's a certain age.

Like an actor giving an open air performance  
of Hamlet in the town square,  
a little cryptically, with a certain restraint,  
not about to lavish himself  
on the likes of these—  
self-possessed as lord of a proud and ancient land  
who puts a quick end to nascent rebellion,  
as one might clamp one's hand on the back of someone's neck—  
that's a certain age.

And now, my God, see how humble they've become,  
mute as a broken piano,  
grateful for a sneer, so much as a shove  
that shows they aren't utterly invisible,  
seeking even you, O God,  
in whom they've never believed.



## In the Streets

I hear something that scares me here,  
and there I remember something I regret;  
this is where I wept; in this place grief stopped me.  
No road doesn't lead me to some Golgotha—

Here I cried. The deaf walls heard.  
In their replying silence I heard the thud  
of the judgement that befalls the weak and the lost.  
Ladies and gentlemen enjoyed the spectacle:  
so *that's* how a woman strides into twilight  
so no one sees her tears.

There: begging, rage, regret,  
the cry of frightened life going under.

My God, my executioner,  
tormented as I am, I believe

I may yet touch a star with these hands,  
hear a word  
of infinite tenderness and depth.

## My People Speak

The gallery of my forebears, my people:

men in velvet and silk,  
long pale faces,  
lips that indicate a weary sensuality,  
delicate hands that rest caressingly  
on grand old folios—  
late in the night they talk to God.

Merchants from Leipzig, Danzig,  
their fine white cuffs, the smell of expensive cigars,  
the scholarly wit of men  
who've grown up pondering the Talmud.  
With fine manners, speaking perfect German,  
they've the dull sly eyes of businessmen,  
cunning, successful, sated.  
Don Juans, salesmen, mystics,

a drunk, a pair of apostates in Kiev  
submissively kissing the cross.

My people:

women set with gems like pagan idols,  
diamonds starry against the red night  
of Turkish shawls,  
in heavy lustrous folds of French satin  
their bodies are lithe, svelte  
as a weeping willow's long hanging branches;  
hands in their laps like an arrangement  
of dried flowers. Extinguished desire,  
drab and overshadowed in their lovely dead eyes.

*Grandes dames* in calico and linen,  
big-boned, strong, athletic,  
with easy, scornful laughter,  
calm speech and eerie silences.

I see them at night, through the windows of my cottage  
unexpectedly erected, like statues.  
In the twilight of their eyes flickers  
cruel delight.

And then, there are a few,  
I say it with shame, who sold themselves  
for a few rubles.

They're all my people, blood of my blood,  
the flame from which my own was kindled,  
all of them mine, living and dead,  
sad, grotesque, and noble,  
stampeding through me  
as through a lightless,  
a haunted house,  
banging and praying and cursing and weeping,  
making my heart thud  
like a great knelling bell of flesh,  
my mouth falls open,  
my tongue flutters,  
the voice isn't mine—  
my people speak.

## City by the Sea

When was it? I don't recall,  
but, like a song you can't quite identify,  
running ceaselessly, wordlessly through my head,  
it keeps returning, a city by the sea,  
a nocturne by Chopin, a balcony  
with wrought iron lilies—

It was dark, there were two sisters  
letting their delicate fingers trail  
in the shadowy steam of memories  
from an old photo album  
whose pictures slowly glowed into full color.

A half-open door flanked by tall vases,  
dancing couples swim past in a trance  
to the tenderly wheedling strains of a waltz.  
Ah, dead youth! That last waltz!  
The dancers float off like ghosts—

When was it? I don't recall,  
but, like a song . . . .

## My Home

In my memory the house seems almost to float  
and rock in the light gray eddies of fog.  
The streets, with their cool, humid gardens,  
are silver with dawn and dew.

People stand in their doorways,  
smile, nod, fade,  
exist and don't,  
through an iridescent fog of tears.

Then the child I was sits in the window,  
her hair streams and glistens in moonlight,  
like heavy rain gleaming in the night.  
Her bright determined eyes peer  
as if into a forest,  
trying to make out her own future form.

Child, you shudder at my approach.



I'm your refuge, I'm your sword





*We went through the days . . .*

We went through the days  
as through a storm-tousled garden,  
we flowered, ripened, got riskily skillful  
at games of life and death,  
our words were full of clouds,  
of the vastness of sky,  
the vastness of dreams.

While leaves rustled in summertime breeze,  
our two stubborn trunks were fused  
into a single tree.

Evenings came over us, heavily dark-blue,  
with the painful aimless yearning of winds and comets,  
the deluding soothing glow of sunset's last touch  
on grass and leaves.

The wind wove into us as well,  
we were penetrated by the sky's final azure,  
we were happy, unthinking as animals,  
cunning as gods at play.

## Painfully Shy

Sitting at a table in that big gray room,  
sluggish and restless, cocooned in my shawl,  
do I look at you, speak to you?

There's nothing to see, except my mouth's a little redder  
and my eyes half-closed,  
perhaps veiled in smoke.

Light and sound overwhelm me  
if I peek at your face through my mist and fog,  
and I feel on my lips your tang of sun and wind.

I draw myself up, careful not to cry out  
like I do inside, my heart beating hard,  
like a trapped bird's wings,  
till it hurts.

I withdraw to the corner of the big gray room,  
wrapped in my shawl as if wrapped in flames.  
Do I look at you, speak to you?  
But I have, in my painful way,  
with my almost closed eyes,  
absorbed you.

*Slowly, glowingly . . .*

Slowly, glowingly,  
you lowered your heavy brow  
to mine, like a planet orbiting  
too close to its star,  
and sank your dark fire  
into my blue flame.

And my room filled with summer,  
filled with night  
when I closed my gleaming tearful eyes  
and silently cried  
because summers have to end.

## Be Kind

I've wandered so long, my love,  
dark and garbled, in and out of other people's lives,  
through hearts like junkyards.

Be kind.

Other people's lives  
to me they were deaths,  
not all that terrible, but deaths nonetheless.

Be kind.

Maybe it's my bad genes,  
always the hard prod of desire  
gallops me back.

Soft-voiced man,  
man of velvet and steel,  
cover me—from the world,  
from what I am.

Be kind.

## You

I entered you in barbarous, splendid procession,  
displaying my claim to the conquered city.  
Four tall, noble Africans carried my train,  
gold-embroidered with poppies and peacocks.  
Behind me marched soldiers,  
flashing the brandish of their short swords,  
bare armed, bare-legged in kilts;  
priests in white linen robes,  
a troop of poets in black and purple silk;  
elephants stomping by, wide-shouldered, broad-footed,  
carrying on their backs the smiling triumphant gods  
of my homeland, sacred apes and birds of brilliant hue  
whose cries rang out sweet and wild  
under your foreign skies.

I entered your life as one does a conquered city.

Rejoicing voices lift my name  
to the sky like a blaze, the echoes fall back  
glittering like a shower of sparks.  
I survey great heaps of emeralds and rubies  
which you've clawed up from your depths  
to present to me, still wet  
from your earth, your blood, your suffering.

But there are still some ill-lit winding streets  
I hesitate to walk, streets of tense silence,  
where my name has never sounded,  
shadows that don't recede before my light.

And you are my defeated city.  
I set up my own gods in your sad empty temples.  
When you try to sing their hymns

in your shy quavering voice  
—to me, that's love and sunlight!

But in your quietest lonely corners  
I've made out in the shadows  
eyes that watch me, mock me,  
the glint of a dagger,  
and it doesn't feel like you who touch me in the night,  
all I feel is a sudden hand . . . .

*Sleep, my love . . .*

Sleep, my love, and deeply slumber.  
you're my forest dark and umber,  
your blue eyes  
are all my sky.

I'm your refuge,  
I'm your sword,  
in heaven, on earth,  
I stand your guard.  
The stars would marvel if they knew  
the things I whisper  
to slumbering you.

## Blue Violin

My dream's like the sound of a violin,  
a song that explains the color blue,  
me and you, such a vision,  
no one knows and no one knew.

Butterflies fluttering  
all in a ring,  
strange blue words  
that a violin sings;

you're my repose,  
I'm night for you,  
a violin played  
in the key of blue.



. . . *or be they gold* . . .

On coins, be they copper or be they gold,  
we see the king's portrait, valuable, cool;  
from our open door this land looks enchanted  
by the distant gleam of a royalty  
even we can pocket, can touch.

I see *my* monarch's face engraved  
in everything, be it dark or bright,  
everything's golden,  
weighty with solid worth,  
a world has opened in my heart  
like a precious yellow flower,

transfigured by your distant gleam,  
my king.

## Wordless Things

Today, all wordless things learn speech.

The slender layers of stratus cloud  
whisper with an azure accent,  
drizzle a hint in fluent dew;  
the crowning leaves of the highest trees  
repeat (loftily, of course)  
the sky-deep words  
of the powerful dreamers from ancient times.  
Every leaf, every star that falls,  
is a saying I take to heart.

Can you hear how the ground resounds  
beneath the slow and lonely footsteps of the night?  
How the gray, shadowy crags  
unroll their broad song,  
solemn and noble,  
in geologic time?

And you, my love,  
my love,  
you say nothing.

*I hold your dear head . . .*

I hold your dear head in my anxious hands,  
watch how, heavily, darkly, in your large eyes  
your living soul rises to face me,  
hovers up from its unfathomable pool.  
I bend down to kiss you, in silent dread.  
God help you.

Haven't we suffered enough?  
What do they want, these shadows,  
this forest so silent it seems to be listening,  
asking something in a voice too deep and sad to hear.  
In tears, I bend down to kiss you  
to taste your dark, incomprehensible life  
with my frightened lips.

*A silence . . .*

A silence, sudden as it is deep,  
between us,  
like an incoherent letter of farewell.

A ship going down  
wouldn't give so vivid  
a sensation of sinking.

A silence, without preface,  
discrete as crying oneself to sleep;  
not a look, not a touch  
between us:

one of the oldest moments known:  
we ourselves deciding  
we have to close behind us  
the gates of Paradise.

*I thought I heard your step . . .*

Startled, I thought I heard your step  
and I cried out in a voice  
I didn't recognize as mine.

You whom I love, who I want  
so painfully,  
why do our glances meet like this,  
enemy eyes narrowed,  
evilly gleaming?  
Why do our words, like swords,  
block, attack and parry?

In the great empty nights  
where you are not,  
my heart calls for you  
beating fast as the clash  
of alarm bells in a city burning down.

*. . . so far away . . .*

It's all so far away, my golden one,  
like an enchanted shore  
fading in hazy sunlit distance—  
golden.

I move forward in time  
as if walking into wind:  
it's hard to look up.

I think I hear your intonation  
in someone's voice,  
turn to it as if called.

I'm baffled. I'm touched,  
deeply, weirdly touched, against my will,  
by memories bright and pale as gold,  
soft as a breath.

## Happiness

The way it felt  
when you lowered your eyes before me—  
maybe that was happiness.

No, it must have been this:  
to walk around town beside you,  
how we didn't even need to talk—

No, it wasn't that at all.

Now I have it.  
The way death bent down smiling  
to get a closer look at our joy,

and all our days were tinged with richness,  
with solemnity, as if empurpled by a sunset—

it was never easy.

## From a Letter not Sent

Our steps, heavy as a drunk's  
on the dusty roads we walked,  
my only one—

I really don't remember.

Like a twilight, weighted with its own colors,  
like a dense bouquet—  
like a bright autumn of colors,  
like October come to a forest,  
that's how he arrived.

The dusty roads we walked  
by fields left bare, the harvest done,  
our unsteady steps  
on a road without signs, without end.  
Was I happy then, my shining one?

I don't remember.



*I walk in the shadows . . .*

I walk in the shadows of your life  
with carefully quiet, obedient steps,  
drawing the curtain of discretion  
over our secret  
with my averted eyes.

I bow before your bright calm regard,  
like a good wife, a good child,  
and do your evidently sensible will,  
and every night I hear the wind call.

By day, she who I should be,  
her face flinches into a quick appropriate grin,  
she flutters to where she's wanted,  
waits when she isn't,  
and seethes.

Forgive me, you who are so reliable,  
if, one night I wander off  
to where the wind calls.

## Song

Your fine-featured, elegant face,  
your smile, so real and so not,  
this today and this road,  
this mood, as pale-blue  
and fragile as if it were porcelain;

all I'd hoped for, all you forgot,  
unexpectedly restored,  
our lives weave together  
their sun-touched threads.

We're gently rocked, cradled by the day;  
we glow as though we'd drunk mulled wine,  
we sway as though to music,  
and inwardly writhe with remembered pleasure.

Linden trees offer their shadow,  
their whisper of leaves, at a price—  
this magic, this quiet's too fragile a thing  
for him to ever remember

*You kissed my hand . . .*

You kissed my hand, with a look around  
to be sure no one saw;  
your voice even trembled, so deep was your feeling,  
though not so deep that you couldn't step  
deftly aside,  
leaving distance sufficient between us  
when someone came by.

"It's such a beautiful day, my dear,  
too beautiful to just walk directly back,"  
your every word, seductive, assured  
down to its resonant depths.

When the earliest stars were visible  
you carefully straightened your hat,  
left no sign of anything askew,  
and took your leave with a silent pause  
—that showed most appropriate feeling.

You walked away so not-furtively,  
so good-natured and blameless,  
to your goddamn house.

I think it would have annoyed me less  
if you'd tottered off drunk to find yourself a whore.

## Nothing at All

There's really nothing to say.

With a kind of bright pure pleasure  
I acknowledge the tribute  
of your pained guilty look

and say to you—nothing at all.

## Ur-Murderess Night

Ur-murderess, Night,  
black mother of the desperate,  
help me!  
Lure and trap him  
like an animal in a net,  
consume him,  
beat him down till he's dead.

As for me,  
I've learned well the taste of my tears  
I've eaten humiliation like bread,  
and now I'll learn to drink myself unconscious,  
to drink long and greedily,  
as one listens to a love song,  
to drink in the sound

of his wife's cries and his children's silence,  
the angry muttering of his friends  
as his remains are removed.

I will stand up like someone suddenly recovered  
from long illness,  
like a black ghost in the red dawn light,  
I will bow to all four quarters of space  
and sing, and sing  
and sing in the face of life  
the praises of death.

*When I walk with my lover . . .*

When I walk with my lover through a humid spring evening,  
don't smile, stranger, as if you alone knew  
he didn't really love me.

If I'm blind, it's because I've chosen to walk  
in a private night which overspreads  
my road, however stony, with its black velvet.

The angel of unhappiness hovers over me  
as if caught in an updraft of passion,  
maybe it's pity,  
and kisses me with his bitter lips.

*The street appeared empty . .*

The street appeared empty when a friend who knows us both  
walked by, maybe recognized us.

I scan the street now with narrowed eyes  
so intensely I feel my pupils must be glowing  
iridescent gray like a cat's eyeshine.

I make a joke about our rotten luck  
and lower my veil.

The street seems to deepen with the bluish dark.  
I feel my words must scorch your ears,  
there's so much hate in my love,  
and in that hate there's so much gloomy joy.

*Don't suppose I've altered . . .*

Don't suppose I've altered,  
don't believe the calm smile,  
I'm a dove-eyed tiger,  
a bouquet of razor blades.  
Don't trust me.

The hour comes, and soon,  
with a smile, a rose, a knife.  
My lips will be sweet, will be red,

my hands will dance, will fly  
and finally tenderly  
and nobly fold themselves,  
then they'll stiffen too,

our bodies side by side,  
limbs gruesomely askew.



*The road is really soundless . . .*

The road is really soundless,  
and gray and cool as a pearl,  
and the setting sun constructs  
a bridge of clouds that hover high,  
like rosy smoke.

My heart is quiet too,  
and your look is heavy with desire—  
to be thus drunk with the heat of my own blood,  
that's not what I want.

My heart is so calm,  
it kneels, in all humility, and feels  
its dark presentiment,  
and it races and it aches,  
for however much it loves,  
there's more it knows.

*I didn't even know . . .*

I didn't even know, my love,  
that my longing for you was engraving your portrait  
across my poems, penning you  
with unconscious, deliberate fingers.

But there you are: my verses  
are polished to the sheen of your glance,  
your profile is in the shape of the lines,  
insistent as your grip.

Bizarre, the way my own words  
touch me  
as you've touched me  
where sound and meaning merge  
and you rise like a stern, bright chord,

bizarre . . .

*Like my eyes . . .*

Like my eyes, peering weakly through a haze of tears,  
the evening is intimate and tinged with blue.  
Say the cold words I know you've rehearsed,  
but gently, if you can.

In a warm corner of your voice  
I find an unexpected moonlit garden  
with its penitent, pale Pierrot

and the toy tragedy  
of how guilty, how sorry you feel.  
I know how this story goes, even you  
should be tired of telling it now.

Listen, it's getting late,  
and later, when our strength has waned,  
the echo of love comes;  
if love doesn't cover us now,  
let us shelter, at least, in its shadow,

see how it descends over us,  
tender and poetic as the names of flowers,  
how it bows like a reed,  
like grace in grief.

*The golden peacock's flown . . .*

The golden peacock's flown.  
Night opened its eyes, like two moons,  
they glowed like a cat's, like two night-shining suns.  
Sleep, sleep, my radiant one.

With yellow cat's eyes was the night looking on.  
I touched you asleep and, unconscious, you moaned.  
The fiddle unknowingly sang to the bow.  
Sleep, sleep, my beloved, troubled one.

You were the fiddle and I held the bow,  
my arm was your cradle, and time became new,  
our play became music; one music, we two.  
Remember how tenderly. Soon,

after happiness sheltered us under its wings—  
a fairy-tale peacock, impossible thing,—  
a happiness we couldn't really have known—  
that peacock of gold, it is flown now and gone,  
my sad one, sleep on, sleep on.

# My Lips are Sealed



## Demons

I entered the garden, like walking into a cloud.  
Everything went white. I heard something sad  
as the tune a demon might whistle. The stars  
burned intensely red, exploded with color,  
as if suddenly, bloodily ripened.

Eyes flew by me, watching,  
in a quick blizzard of scornful stares.  
Voices enclosed me like the folds of a boa,  
I saw its mouth open  
for me,  
ever  
so  
slowly,

I saw how it flickered its red-as-flame tongue  
as it sang a song sad as demon might hum.

## From My Darkness

1

So anxious that I stammer;  
bent and pale though I am,  
I writhe with the effort  
of finding the words  
that will emit, like radiation,  
my joyous, my really cosmic,  
hatred of you.



The day relaxes its talons,  
lets its victim fall.

Balled up in the dark,  
laughably small,  
I listen deep till I hear  
a wail as pure and vast as a baby's  
rise up inside me

and extend itself as far as morning,  
like a bridge across the night.

Just as a truly noble wine  
is made from the gore of stamped-on grapes,  
so I've learned to suck, to extort my joy  
from pain,  
and hold it up in twisted fingers,  
brilliantly visible  
for God's unpitying eyes.

*This is night.*

This is night, the sad fact, non-existence.  
We hide it behind a shimmering mist  
of cheating dreams.

Wretched girl. what will become of you?

Stay calm, be smart. Don't be fooled  
by the stars, they only belie the night.  
The play of shadows, scents and dew  
might be enough to bamboozle children.

Quiet, quiet,  
hear with a numb shudder  
how the earth opens,  
and the worm, without a mouth or a sound,  
calls for you.

*Slender ships . . .*

Slender ships drowse,  
rocked by the gentle green swell of water;  
shadows sleep in its depths,  
in the cold heart of the bay.

The winds are still.  
Clouds glide ghost-silent across night sky.  
Dim, colorless and calm, the earth waits  
for the flash and then the thunder.

So do I.

## Hush Now

Lower your tone, my commanding voice;  
look down, my eyes that miss little  
and pardon nothing,  
close your long-lashed lids like a merciful curtain.  
Let those demanding hands lie folded,  
ruefully at rest in your lap. Just wait.

Another evening comes, enchanting,  
imperceptibly, as is the way with time.  
Tenderly, weightlessly, fatally,  
it touches your body, proud woman.

The dark, towering cumulonimbus  
of your hair goes gray. Nimble fingers etch  
around your mouth, your eyes,  
fine lines that map in small  
a vast loneliness.

Hush now, hush. It's nothing now,  
nothing that hasn't already happened.

## A Veil

Sometimes, it's like I'm wearing a veil,  
I'm here and not here,  
veiled off and veiled in,  
and my steps synchronize with yours,  
invisible passers-by.

I feel it again,  
warm as blood, defiant as a flower,  
the madness of my springtime.

Across roads roaring with traffic  
I carry you with me, carefully  
as if I my too-full heart could spill.  
I carry your voices, your smiles,  
even your grimaces,

as one does a remembered song,  
with soundless, barely moving lips,  
as you turn on your finger, to be sure it's still there,  
a precious ring.

## Devils

They skitter past  
in the unwholesome green beams  
of a moon which must be suffering  
from some woman's complaint,  
they occult themselves with all their little limbs  
in dark corners.

And they're good natured.  
They extend their forelegs,  
black, flexible as tentacles,  
and point them, like twisted fingers  
at you and you alone.

Really, they don't bite.

So why are you shaking, O man?  
You slender island losing ground among rising waves,  
you little flicker of lightning extinguished  
in overwhelming clouds,  
you God-thrown shining knife,  
you crystal goblet of sunshine smashed against the night,  
stupid, stupid you, hopeless in this darkness

in the unwholesome green beams  
of a moon which must be suffering  
from some woman's complaint,

## Night

I fight in the darkness with enemies I can't see.

Every night, such a whistling and banging,  
such a tramp of retreating feet!  
I'm deathly tired as if I really were bleeding,  
and I won't, I won't give up.

And every next night, the broad onslaught  
of silence, pouring in rivers—  
like a church organ, it never has to stop and take a breath,  
but radiates forever, like light  
while I lie and look up  
at a vast shadowy face  
bent over me smiling.



## Tired

Weary today.

Other women's voices are shrill, they grate.  
Not as painful though as that one kind woman's  
look of pity, or the word overheard  
that still burns and burns  
like an obstinate ember.

So tired.

In my room the shadows lengthen,  
night reaching in to touch,  
gloved in sunset red.

All day I've been thinking of death.

The silence in my room is soft as black velvet,  
the mirror shimmers like deep waters,  
waters dark and heavy as velvet.

Drowning they say's a pretty easy way to go.

So tired.

## Insomnia

Dear monsters, be patient.

It's sober day. The world is full  
of light and sound to its furthest sunlit brink.

I walk among people, on roads as familiar as friends,  
grateful, amazed at how I'm free of you,  
at how small you seem, how far you are,

like an army's dull tramp on a distant street  
unheard in a quiet house where everyone's still asleep;  
like a glimpse of people in a golden lamplit window,  
seen barely, seen by chance  
as you cross an unfamiliar alley,  
merely silhouettes, but something in the gesture,  
in the movement of the shadows,  
makes you feel like you should remember who they are.

Patience, dear monsters.

Night comes, and the heart, still sick with an ancient guilt,  
the heart, alone and unprotected,  
hears your steps. Now they're closer,  
and you're back. The room melts away.

I sink among you like an inexperienced swimmer.

I'm trampled, twisted,  
and you're so frightening and yet so vague.

Regrets mountain up around me  
like giant hounds. You howl invisibly through me,  
a numb dumbstruck roaring of the story  
of an old, old guilt. The heart weeps like a lost lamb,  
a nearly human bleat of fear and woe,  
and cries itself to sickly sleep.

## You Are

Night got into my house,  
night, with all its rush of unseen waters, wings,  
flickering glimpses of path, swamp, fog.

I lay there, stiff in the dark.

Trees got into my house,  
forced themselves enormously in,  
trunks, roots, looked at me  
in their ancient way, peering through their leaves.

Clouds, weird huge clouds  
come with thunderous laughter,  
clouds with the dark vague faces  
of forgotten gods.  
They circle overhead, heavy  
and bleak as an oncoming storm,  
resounding at me, "You are, you are!"

And there indeed I was,  
lying there stiff in the dark.

## Hard Heart

My hard, scornful heart,  
let them inundate you,  
flood their light into your darkness—  
whores, mothers with children,  
beggars, cripples, dancers,  
old people from the city—

no more of this alone-with-God.

Hard heart, run,  
escape to people from God.

## Draft for an Epitaph

Tell him  
she couldn't forgive herself  
for the way she cherished her depression,  
the shame of which made her walk through life  
with tentative, apologetic tread.

Say  
that she protected the flame entrusted her  
till death, like a candle in the hollow of her hands,  
and in that same fire  
she burned alive.

Say how  
in her bravest hours  
she held out against God himself,  
how her blood sang with poetry,  
how she was destroyed  
by the envy of the deaf.

*Words to engrave . . .*

Words to engrave in marble,  
to inlay with gold—  
that's never what I went for.

In fact, these poems aren't what I had in mind.

What I wanted was as different from these  
as fire, or joyous storms in August,  
to unexpectedly tear off  
the faded outer forms of reality, impulsively  
as wind ripping laundry from a clothesline.

Too late.

And I wanted to be different with people,  
though even now I'm not ready  
to endorse family ties,  
or even parenthood.

But if I *could* have forgiven myself  
for my tortured life,  
could have gone up to this one, to that one,  
those who were rotten, those who were noble,  
the ones on fire with dreams,  
those who lost their world,  
those who squandered someone else's,

and said to them, "I yield myself to you,  
I'm giving myself away, like a saint in a legend,  
my rich, my glorious goodness  
will overwhelm you—

Too late.

Often I think I hear footsteps behind me  
when no one's there,  
and often I think I should end it all,  
find the exit.

And I swear  
by Else Lasker-Schüler,  
by Rilke and by Baudelaire,  
that I'd rather say nothing than whine.

I'll endure a failing body's ultimate indignities  
bravely. Maybe in my last hour I'll dream,  
ascend, tremendous,  
see the planets turning on their axes,  
dawn reddening over fields still asleep,  
in their blankets of mist,  
see my sad child kneel down  
in the midst of a glad, prosperous village,  
to watch me, a distant figure in the sky.

I'll shrug my still beautiful shoulders,  
try to keep from crying, force my trembling lips  
to smile, succeed,  
with a little desperate intake of breath  
at such effort, but smile I will  
in the face of heaven,  
making brave show —  
as a condemned man might exhale  
the smoke of his last cigarette —  
against God's colossal impassive mask.





# Sun, Pavement, Ways



*In the rich keen colors . . .*

In the rich keen colors  
of a deeply overgrown garden  
where willow trees hang their pallid manes  
and the pines, like low clouds,  
cool and shade the day,  
where tulips flicker their garnet and gold—  
in a garden transfixed, made drunk, by sunbeams,  
the locust, with its deafening, metallic cry,  
forges autumn.

Fresh grass that remembers  
the morning's fateful taste of frost  
adds its slightly desperate note of green  
to the song of fall.  
The tops of the trees,  
brilliantly colored as flowers,  
sway in time to it;  
birds gilt-edged in October light,  
balance on branches, depart like sparks  
from the anvil of time. In the jewel-toned leaves,  
wind-stirred, flickering,  
bright as blown-on coals,  
autumn screams.

*Now the brown roofs . . .*

Now the brown roofs gleam red,  
the windows glow like pearls in a glass of wine,  
dull as the whites of sightless eyes,  
a sense of rest encloses the view  
like an arch, far distant you.

A sense of rest encloses the view.  
There's a wisp of smoke, a hearth-fire burns  
with faint weary warmth, like that of a tear.  
The telegraph wire sways in the wind  
as though someone were sending a song,  
and you're not here.

## Evening

Sunset on the farthest edge of sky  
flames like a garden.  
Clouds, a disheveled purple riot of irises,  
the new white of lilies, the fresh red of poppies,  
sorrow-heavy and darkly-golden roses,  
hover at the end of the sky field  
blooming its continuous blue.

Streets take on the violet-grayness of dove wings;  
everything brims with its own arcane  
secret being, each outward appearance opaque  
but alive, like the eyelids of things that dream.

In the gathering dusk, people feel  
the doleful sweetness of roses,  
and the shadowed earth  
becomes a phantom heaven.

## The Sun

I've learned  
the sun is God's golden mask,  
for often, when fury and loathing made my pulse  
thud in my skull, the blood  
abated its race as I felt God smiling  
from behind that mask of splendor.

It can happen, that in a garden richly green  
and golden with afternoon light,  
I'll see the sun through the trees,  
hanging from a branch like some beautiful fruit.  
Once, in such an illuminated hour,  
as my mouth fell open in awe,  
I could taste its juice.

And once, as day waned into evening,  
I saw it setting on the sea like a swan made of flame,  
and I rode on its back, pale and tall,  
raising a silver trumpet to my lips.

*The sadness of all that is . . .*

The sadness of all that is, my love,  
the sadness of things that know they can't last—

When we walk down the empty streets  
and you let your hand, tanned by the sun  
of a summer now departed,  
rest autumnally in mine  
and my blood doesn't quicken at your touch—  
at that metabolic level  
I don't remember who you are.

This is the mystery, my love,  
of transitory things—

I think—I think the earth, that all earthly things  
long to be gone,  
and that's what turned us to stone,  
to great dark living statues wandering  
aimlessly, placing one stone foot  
in front of the other  
on a road to nowhere.

# Rain

1

Flowers swaying in silvery rain,  
lulled, made drunk by their own perfume.  
Slowly they bend to the rain.  
Soothed and caressed by its subtle limitless fingers,  
the tall grass bows to the earth.

The trees have flowered in this argent rain,  
flowered with pale opals of water  
that hesitate at the edge of every leaf.  
The trunks and tops of trees rise in the air  
like slender, high, magic, silver fountains,  
like voices raised in ecstatic song,  
in ecstasy and tears.



It's a violet day.  
The roads unfurl like clouds stained by dusk;  
fluent ribbons of country mud,  
like basking snakes,  
with scales the colors of copper and blood.

A young girl's curls shine their gold highlights,  
like sunbeams piercing mist.

Other faces swim distantly into view,  
faces of a weird nobility. They vanish.

Today, heaven descended to earth,  
people walk through clouds, more than mortally calm;  
at times they remember some grief  
with an ever so delicate shudder.

## Lily

Autumn befalls this city and me.  
My gloomy heart, hush, and wonder  
how a city tree, trapped in asphalt  
and concrete, musters a last new leaf,  
tender as a lily, at bare branch's end.

Autumn weighs upon me,  
heavy are my steps. I'm old.  
Dark heart of mine, don't curse life,  
still believe in wonders.  
Somewhere in this city, in this world,  
I too still bloom, tender as a lily.

## To a Girl

All the winter trees flower white today with snow.  
Why are you sad, my snowy one?  
Where do you go when you look away  
and you're no longer here?

Cheek in one hand,  
the other hand unclasped, relaxed,  
your eyes shut delicately  
as the leaves of a mimosa ;  
with a last lulled look you slowly close them.

I listen to your breath, ponder your sleep,  
your private night.  
You're so happy now, so docile,  
little bird, you roost.

Today, in the melting weather,  
the slight white weight  
dropped from every tree in turn,  
like shot snowbirds.

## Brest-Litovsk

1

The old city, the little gray city  
astride the Mukhovets river,  
astride the borders of Russia and Poland both,  
its nationality precarious;  
when the smoke of World War One had cleared  
my Brest-Litovsk was lost,  
as gone as classical Athens, as Troy —

But sometimes, in a whisper of painful love,  
I conjure up its shade,  
its twisting narrow streets,  
alleys indirect, in no hurry to lead somewhere.  
Its Aprils, somehow always unexpected,  
startling rainstorms from a sky full of sun;  
the old fortress on its island in mid-river,  
rising silent, turrets looming seriously grim;  
a couple of old windmills, their quadrate wings  
still wearily uplifted;  
oak trees that have loitered for centuries  
outside the Kaiser Orchards;  
the sound of oars in the Mukhovets river,  
their sad little splashes  
like someone saying “hush, hush.”

It's sabbath. The boulevards are empty,  
yawning wide on this day of rest.  
Strong tea pours in steaming rivers  
from sparkling samovars.  
A kaleidoscope of paired sabbath candles,  
women saying prayers in Yiddish;  
grandchildren, grandmothers kerchiefs on their heads

like peasants, women with elegant bonnets,  
an orgy of silk ribbons,  
thin-lipped elegant elderly ladies  
praying, invoking the patriarchs  
Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Present-day patriarchs,  
sit at the table, fingers in their beards,  
pondering their way through the maze  
of Talmud page (a square of text  
older than Babylon, encircled  
by a thousand years of squabbling commentaries,  
the one by Rashi's on the inside of the page,  
by the folio's spine, roofbeam of the edifice.)  
The scholars chant their text aloud  
like scripture: old men's high voices  
interwoven with the bass of a student soon to marry.

In the little gardens beside the houses,  
sunflowers, white annual rezedas,  
poppies; girls' blond hair in braids;  
cockades of cadets; lines from Pushkin  
quoted by young men  
with an air of Russian sophistication.

Rosy grows the twilight sky,  
quiet the talk, indistinct the voices.  
Evening mist, couples stray off  
towards the fields as if following the music  
of an invisible fiddler. Springtime overspreads  
the town with a vague shimmer  
of sorrow, and the smell of lilacs.

Early evening, young women at the doorstep  
 talking, absorbed and serious,  
 about their men working in Germany,  
 about bad luck, sickness caused by demons,  
 about gypsies who steal little children.

Children stand in the shadows listening,  
 excited, wishing some of those gypsies  
 would come steal *them*.

Innocent little Cleopatras,  
 fifteen year old *frauleins* with gloves and parasols,  
 glide splendidly along the street,  
 briefly lifting their veils  
 for a better look at the boys,  
 listening to teenage admirers  
 who throw in a phrase or two  
 of poetry in Polish  
 so beautiful it leaves you tipsy  
 as would a kiss.

Sunny afternoons make the shopkeepers drowsy,  
 passersby are lazy and dazed with the warmth.

Here comes a Hassidic *rebbe*,  
 a holy man, black hat and long black coat,  
 like a storm-cloud, bristling eyebrows tufted up  
 over eyes afire at the sight of we heathen.  
 The street reels beneath this prophet's feet,  
 yeshiva boys who see him, themselves still unseen,  
 hold their breath.

In the background, gentile soldiers and officers  
disrupt the Jewish mood of this vignette.

On a highway about as even  
as a hunchback's back, a lone coach bangs and rattles  
loud in the stillness as a subway train.

O soft sandy banks of my riverside city,  
tea-roses and oak trees,  
the way the sight of your streets and houses  
met me every morning early,  
comforting as the smell of fresh bread!

## Odessa

Do you remember, handsome cavalier,  
how joyously the young ladies leaned  
over the railings of their balconies,  
in a flutter of veils, eyelashes, tresses,  
whenever you strolled by our courtyard,  
a stranger, slender and perfect?

O my sad cavalier, do you recall  
a small brilliant circle of girls  
in a hall all brilliant with gilding and crystal,  
do you recall the longing  
in the waltz's caressing melody.  
I can halfway recall the way it went,  
we were then still children, in a sense.

It seemed as though we spun on a grand boulevard  
under not yet usual electric lamps  
like little brilliant cold multiple suns.  
It seemed as though we floated, we flew,  
so engrossed we were in one another.

The orchestra poured song in a perfumed dream  
that unmistakably meant,  
"This is your time to flower!"  
Can you remember what we felt then?

There aren't any words subtle enough  
to express such mysteries,  
Can words convey a fragrance  
like that of the wind sweeping into Odessa  
from across the steppes,  
the smell of sun-warmed tar from wooden ships  
in her harbor, how the Black Sea sings



to splendid Odessa descending to her harbor,  
with her countless marble steps  
like the train of a lady's ballgown?

## Not Happy

People—that is, women—look at me funny,  
as if they were thinking, “Poor dear,  
you go and have yourself a good cry.”

I really don’t care for my furnished room,  
I’m really not happy with anything.

On the subway today,  
rocked by the train, I swayed back and forth,  
just like a tired old orthodox Jew  
bobbing as he recites his prayers.  
The nights are dark as the dreams of the oppressed—

I don’t much like night either.

Day retains a certain holiness,  
monotonously bright as a verse from the psalms  
in an old prayer-book—  
maybe I wouldn’t take it all so hard

if it weren’t for my dreams, for poetry.

## At the Café

1

All alone now in the café  
in the hour when voices are hushed, when words  
become indistinct, and the lit lamps  
shine like pearls,  
gradually, gently more splendid in the dark,  
like far-off swans made of light  
about to sail down the street.

Waiter, another drink, if you please.

I'm alone now in the café.  
If I could hear time  
it would sound like the silken rustle of my dress  
as I raise my glass of dark and fragrant wine  
to toast to the street, to all that is distant,  
and the thought rises in me, like a song,  
that, seen from the street,  
I too must shine.

Through the cigarette smoke, every face looks like a mask.  
Here's a joke, a shrug, a pained look.  
As discretion requires, you explain  
we're barely acquainted. I go pale.

"I'm sorry my dear, I didn't mean to hurt you."

With cold, composed faces,  
with irony and wit we mask the fact  
we share a particular intimate fever.

Howls of laughter, grimace-like grins.

"I didn't mean to hurt you. But, you understand . . ."

Through this cold light,  
these cold voices and looks,  
my silence swims towards you,  
an occult but unmistakable signal,  
it flows around you like a summer breeze,  
says tenderly what I can't say here  
about us. Wordless words, about us.  
I'm silent. In my longing to hold you  
I reach out to you with trembling, invisible hands.

## Girls in Crotona Park, the Bronx

Young women have woven themselves  
into an early autumn evening,  
blending with the landscape  
like figures fading in a photograph.

Their eyes are cool,  
their smiles thin-lipped and forced,  
their clothes are lavender, old-rose and apple-green  
and in their veins flows dew;

their words are bright and empty.  
Botticelli loved women like these in his dreams.

## Dusk on Fifth Avenue

1

April. The metallic note of a clock  
tolling six, pure as surgical steel,  
and the dying day exalts the street  
with the touch of its flame-colored hands.

And the faces, all the faces—how beautiful, how sad—  
with the sadness of April.

Traffic of black departing cars  
like a funeral procession;  
the rustle of paler springtime skirts.

The marble steps of hotels are the setting  
for people captured in the serene  
luxurious gleam of lamps,  
like the fire in a gem.

Glowing butterflies flutter in the dusk  
along the avenue as the sunlight  
mutes to a misty violet.

Limousines swim by, dark cryptic ships.  
The helpless, uninhibited scream of a siren  
hangs in the air  
with unseen but credible menace.

Young girls walk by with the lilt of a poem,  
in their eyes: night, money, the excitement  
you only get with fear.  
Their clothing flutters in the evening breeze

like the little nervous wings  
of brainless butterflies.



## Broadway Evening

Evening opens before me like a flower,  
the street roars like a waterfall.  
The pastel coral colors of the sunset rush upwards,  
shop windows catch that light,  
become flaming caves.  
Within them: fountains of deep pile velvet,  
softer than water;  
outpourings of silk, heavy and cool.

People advance in their eternal dance,  
find, lose, one another.  
Eyes seek each other,  
eyes that laugh when glances meet,  
eyes that almost sing—

But to me, it seems so solemn I feel I ought to kneel.

Evening opens before me  
like a dark blue flower,  
petals soft as shadows, as wind.

A car flees past on the long black streak  
of evening street, a lit billboard slices  
into the sky like an upraised sword.  
Loud voices mingle, blend as if in a kiss;  
heard, unheard, their bright noise soars into space,  
sound waves circling up and out.

Eyes seek each other,  
eyes that laugh when glances meet,  
eyes that almost sing—

To me, it's all mournful.  
It feels like I'm keeping a vigil.  
It feels, O world, like goodbye.

## The Gates of Hell

I pass through a thousand high-arched gates,  
gates of bronze that open with a deep  
resounding squeak of tortured brass.  
Sunlight, echoed off the metal,  
fills the cathedral-like passage with golden gleam  
as an organ's song would a church.

Deep-carven in the glowing open portals  
are epics of love, despair, rebellion,  
everything I burningly yearned for  
that didn't actually happen.

Niches enshrine certain hours  
that seemed eternal, with statues,  
naked statues, forever young;  
these will never lose their slender elegance.

It's good, it's good, the way that leads to terror  
and annihilation, these gates that shine in the sun  
and sing on their hinges.

## Tinted Windows

Gray life swims up to be viewed  
through my small, high,  
variously tinted windows.

People look like thin flickers of flame,  
or clouds, or towers,  
or dreams never yet dreamt—

all of them pass along purple and golden roads,  
nobly, silently, deathwards.

The whole earth appears to me  
splendid as a sunset:  
a vast, fiery, dying flower,

wavering, fading like a rainbow  
in the variously tinted  
windows of my eyes.

## A Song of Pride

High in their palaces, on golden thrones,  
sit the queens of life, their gaze  
is diamond-hard and diamond-bright;  
their lips, the red of ripe, cut pomegranate.  
With white, long-fingered, aristocratic hands  
they apportion to men  
goblets of poison—or joy.

High on the fifth floor,  
enthroned on a chair that wobbles,  
I sit, a queen of words,  
typing, with long-fingered, aristocratic hands.  
I create a race of men, women,  
and pensive, disquieted children  
to whom I apportion  
goblets of poison, or of joy.

## The Masquerade is Over

I too have seen colossal figures in the clouds,  
seen elves in place of rats  
scamper in confusion across the asphalt;  
stars bloomed atop steel streetlamps;  
out of dark bushes no unseen pigeon  
but an alto sang tremulous cadenzas.  
Night and sunset were a young black man  
who bent down to offer me a rose.

Now I'm old.  
The masquerade is over.

I lie among the very roots of things,  
I feel the pulse of being itself thud,  
a heavy, fast gallop, through my astonished heart.  
It's a fermentation, an awakening,  
a long, noisy vigil over the dead,  
an agonized climb to the light  
pushing through rocks and dirt,  
while the earth, the place of graves,  
with all its sickly dreaming cities,  
grandly rotates  
with its mountains, forests,  
its lands begirt with shimmering seas,  
and above it, the perplexing fiery omens  
of stars, dawns, sunsets,  
in a shapeless, incomparable, unending night  
that doesn't recognize time,  
and extends as far as the fear of death  
— a vision we frame with myth  
and the gentle gold of poetry —

and every life is much like every other,  
and it's all so huge and incomprehensible.

Reuben Ludwig  
(1895-1926)

A hard, graceless day among the graves,  
a louring sky, lead-heavy, lead-gray.  
It still feels like I could run into Ludwig on the street,  
taking a stroll with his pretty wife,  
coat folded over his arm.  
Our conversation would roam among poems,  
great poems that tower over us like poplar trees.  
I still expect to hear him coyly inquire,  
“What is it you’re up to, Margolin?”

We remember him now, as quiet and gentle  
as twilight, as a tear, as a prayer,  
as the touch of beloved slender hand—

He was a gypsy, a singer, a man at home  
in the deep south, stormy, proud, good-hearted,  
a Yiddish Galahad,  
with his coat folded over his arm  
and his broad-brimmed hat.  
And we used to roam among poems—

He talked loud and fast, he had a lot of ground to cover.  
Like a teenage apprentice baker  
having his first go at the dough,  
he kneaded his whole soul into whatever was on the table—

the red earth and clouds of the American west,  
joys gone cold, the Mississippi river valley,  
remnants of Native American tribes  
—he wasn’t some high-pitched flute  
trembling delicate arpeggios,  
he wasn’t an angel with broad wings of fire,



he wasn't any of those old time emblems  
that have lost for us their gloss—

he was a human being, down-to-earth,  
passionate, sad,  
and we loved him for being just that.

We'll remember his poems about the Blacks  
who had to fight so hard for so little,  
African faces of a strange nobility;  
his poem about Daisy McClellan,  
the Black woman, the childless  
giantess of love—  
we'll remember them—or maybe not,  
for Ludwig, who took his weary leave so young,  
was far more beautiful than his poems.

He'll always be with me, roaming through poems,  
and I'll always hear him coyly inquire  
with that smile in his voice,  
“What is it you're up to, Margolin?”

*In the sand . . .*

In the sand, we wrote the word "world,"  
then "God."

Exhausted from shouldering  
the weight of such dreams,  
we finally scratched in, a little maliciously,  
I admit, and a good deal deeper, the word  
"eternity."

Our arms feel terribly heavy.  
We can't really see what we're writing,  
we peer, as if through heavy rain . . .

Something has to last, here on earth,  
it *has* to,  
some mystical shimmer unseen,  
a word unheard.

## One Single Poem

I only write, over and over,  
one single poem  
of despair and pride;  
it gleams like a sword  
in my shadows.

If my words have music,  
it's the song of metal,  
the clangor and shrill ring  
of steel being sharpened.

My verses are heavy,  
with memory, weighty  
with what's unsaid  
as a sword.

## For Franz Werfel

"Happy is life among the archetypes."

—Franz Werfel, Austrian poet.

It's always been like this for me.  
I grew up in the temple of poetry,  
aspired to the height of its pillars,  
elder brother. How happy is that life?

My wings lifted me from ordinary thoughts,  
from commonplace people,  
from any kind of life.

Now I tower in empty space,  
godlike in my loneliness,  
a dolorous statue,  
a cliff that sings.

Voices, laughter, sobs  
swim up into my hearing  
as if from a hostile planet.

## The Wall

(a duet in verse, with Reuben Iceland)

(Iceland)

We're going to build a wall  
between ourselves and this much-trumpeted new age  
the outcry about wild life in big cities,  
the insistent shrilling  
that the death spasms of various old worlds  
are the birth-pangs of messianic times.  
Smiling, we'll build, and none of it will reach us.

(Margolin)

You may succeed in walling off the noise,  
but the silence, the eye of that storm, remains.  
Our crude, noble, inadequate world,  
with its looks and its gestures,  
its whispering of love and how nothing ever lasts,  
life's too-intricate rhythms  
and indecipherable background melodies—

perhaps, after years of work,  
we might succeed in expressing in moonlight,  
in lines of transparent verse,  
the inexpressible bend of a bough;  
birds in flight like a spray of little dark stars;  
the gray reverberation of sorrow  
like a bell with a voice so low and deep  
you can't hear but only feel its clangor,  
subtle as the almost-smile  
of the lips of a tired woman.



Mary





*What do you want, Mary?*

What do you want, Mary?

Maybe—to have a baby drowse in my lap,  
to look down at its radiant face;  
maybe to wander slowly through the wordless depths  
of evening in a grim house, waiting and waiting,  
in love with a man who doesn't love me,  
in a stillness vast as despair.

What do you want, Mary?

I would have wanted my feet to sink into the earth  
like roots, to stand alone in the middle of a field  
shimmering with dawn and dew,  
to feel the sun suffuse me,  
ripen me, like a new world,  
to breathe in the scent of morning meadows  
still dreamy with mist,  
to feel the wide wild onset of sudden rain  
beat down on me, drenching, heavy,  
summer rain, warm as a kiss,  
with a rush of thunder;  
to have the storm fall upon me  
eagle-screaming, seize and twist me—

Am I person, a lightning flash,  
a vague anxiety felt on the street?  
Am I the earth which suffers so  
though we never hear her groans?

I don't know anymore.  
With heavy eyes,  
eyes tired from crying, I yield myself  
to sun, wind, rain—

But Mary, what do you want?

## Mary's Prayer

O God, humble and mute are the paths  
that lead to you,  
through the fires of sin and of tears—

and all paths lead to you.

I have built a nest for you  
out of love,  
and a temple  
out of silence.

All night I stand watch for you,  
I am your maidservant, your lover.  
Never have I seen you.

I prostrate myself to you, far from the world,  
and I feel you moving through me  
darkly, like the thought of death,  
and bright as the broad blade of a sword.

## Mary and the Priest

You are a chalice of sacramental wine,  
Mary, yours are the soft curves  
of a slender-stemmed, elegantly rounded chalice  
placed on a ruined altar.

A priest elevates slowly  
in his long-fingered slender hands  
this crystal chalice in which  
your life trembles and burns  
as it does in his eyes,  
and you wish, in the drunken ecstasy  
of your wine-like being,  
to be shattered.

Mary, Mary,  
soon your life will break apart  
with a bright high cry  
and your death will paint these cold dead stones  
red and hot  
and the forgotten gods who haunt this altar  
will smile, red and hot.

## Lonely Mary

She went among people  
as though through a desert,  
murmuring her own name.  
“Mary.”

Sometimes she was Mary  
and the man she loved as well.  
“I can hear your words, Mary,  
your voice comes to me out of hot fog,  
I make out your silhouette . . .”  
She spoke so low  
it seemed to her the voice was not her own.

She'd gently leaf through the picture-book  
of imagined happiness,  
then suddenly turn pale  
loathing what she'd become.

## Mary and the Guests

Mary goes back and forth through the rooms  
arranging the fruit in bowls, setting out wine,  
placing tall slender flowers in a tall slender vase.  
She nods and smiles, pleasantly confused,  
and everyone's there and no one's there.

Should it trouble her now, the way her youth flickered by,  
reflecting an old man's sunset, how she gasped  
at the tragedy of life going out like an ember,  
baffled, in despair?

His long, long shadow, the sense of how it ends,  
stretched over all of them, the dreamers,  
the masters, the slaves,  
all whom she'd known in the night.

She says,

"You, quiet, suntanned man,  
foreign as if you'd fallen from a star,  
you brought your own night to my white-walled room  
that spring, you were a grail  
of dark mystical wine.

"And you, both holy-man and criminal,  
that is to say, a poet—do you remember  
the harsh delight, the outbursts of anger,  
of tenderness, the final fairytale journey  
through a summer, passing through sleepy villages  
like figures in their dreams,

"and you, and you, and you,  
you long chain of lives that have linked with mine—

“A child’s here too. From so far away  
it somehow found its way to its mother’s door.  
Now it’s huddled in the corner,  
so small and full of sadness,  
pale, quiet, withdrawn—  
those eyes, how those eyes blame me!  
How much worse when they look away . . .

“Welcome, beggar, my own future form,  
ugly and black as a raven. I remember  
how once you shone and laughed  
in the middle of a blizzard like a Norse god!”

Here in the courtyard is a well  
and green jasmine bushes  
with the silent fireworks of their starlike flowers;  
guest from as far away as Lithuania;  
the joy of a wedding party,  
people elbow one another, even the street  
is a tumult come up suddenly  
like a fire you thought was out,  
a whole bright world impossibly packed between walls  
that couldn’t ever hold them.

They’re carrying Mary up dizzy spiral stairs  
hacked into the cliff of a disordered dream  
in the sadness of nights alone in strange cities,  
they riot as once they did, with longings body-hot,  
cravings that run sullen in one’s very blood,  
and they always do—they carry her, where?  
Where do such longings lead at last?

Maybe even back to that shabby room,  
hazy in lamplight, to a figure that almost  
fades at her approach—her mother’s

gray head, her soothing touch,  
the hurt and accusation in the gaze—  
the hurt is worse when she looks away.

Mary hears a whispering, maybe just a noise,  
then a silence that derides.

Mary goes back and forth through the rooms,  
a chill calm comes upon her.  
The guests all seem more distant, less familiar.  
Who are they? Who are any of them?  
She's alone at someone else's party.  
How could she have ever had anything  
to do with these people?  
She never even lived her *own* life.



## Mary Wants to Become a Beggar

To become a beggar —  
as one might heave overboard  
even a precious cargo to keep a ship from sinking;  
to throw to the winds love, happiness,  
my good name, my bad reputation,  
till I myself don't know who I am.

To become a beggar. To shuffle along the pavement,  
mute, like the disquieting shadow  
of normal, sunlit life;  
to beg, and with coins tossed me out of charity  
to buy myself some fun, dazed deranging dreams  
in the silver perfumed curls of opium smoke,  
to doze doped-up in the street, in the sun,  
like the stalk of a weary tall weed  
bent over in a field,  
to be like a flower short a few petals,  
grimy, a little wilted, but a flower still, holy,  
with a couple of silken still perfect leaves —  
to wake to the sickly glimmer of street-lamps,  
to unfold myself from the gray quiet night  
of my mind into gray quiet night,  
like a cloud emerging from fog,  
like a darker shadow in the darkness —

to become a prayer, a flame,  
to give myself away, tenderly,  
or cruelly, like a thing in heat —

to be alone  
as only kings and beggars are alone,  
and miserable.

To go like that, with wide astounded eyes,  
through tremendous bewildering days and nights  
to judgement, into the painful light of who I am.

## Mary and Death

Mary said her goodbyes to the bright house  
where she'd lived, saluted each room  
with a nod to its walls, then out.

She went into night as one enters a forest  
where you can feel God's presence,  
his breath on your neck  
so the hairs stand up in dread,  
where every shadow shape looms a threat.

But darkness also covers people's pain,  
calming, gentle as snow that falls in the night.

After Mary, in strange parade,  
came all her lovers, merry, and in their best clothes,  
beggars, drunks and drifters,

like little pathetic lovesick birds,  
a couple of cripples hobbled in the rear,

lepers too, who desperately attempted,  
as they neared, to cover ulcers with their hands.

At the procession's head went Death,  
an adolescent, with a black flute,  
he played the old, old song of human desire  
with touching nostalgia.



# Images



## A Human Being

He knew  
he was a not fully realized experiment  
in grand passions, truth and duplicity,  
a half-baked metamorphosis  
of incandescent, burning thought  
and raw flesh and blood  
— along with millions of similar  
mongrel mixtures of giant and gnome,  
an ironic, needless demonstration  
of the fact that the Almighty  
just isn't that good at his job.

Often he thinks, as he strides back and forth  
in his apartment, "For a mountain to exist,  
are valleys truly required?"

"OK, fine I accept it.  
I'll shoulder the burden of existence,"  
he smiles, a little too satisfied  
with this superfluous resolve. He smooths back the hair  
that would have been on his bald head,  
lights a cigarette,  
considers how day follows day  
with the endless necessity  
by which step follows step down the staircase  
which is this world of earth and sky,  
for which let us poetically picture  
the steps as jade and the risers amethyst.

Sometimes, all alone, he shares  
with himself this secret,  
“Since I’m a Jew . . .

“Since I *am* a Jew . . .”

—that’s as far as he ever gets  
with this particular train of thought.

And really, it’s not the least impressive  
of heroic acts to drink your coffee black  
during an instant unreliably balanced  
between two eternities of non-being,  
to raise your cup in an existential toast,  
and say, “God, I really don’t hold it against you.  
No hard, feelings, God.”



## Madwoman

It was raining and she was barefoot  
on pavement she took for dewy grass,  
her ragged skirts dragged,  
she went laughing, feeling quite restored.  
Suddenly children were running after her,  
marching around her with over-long strides,  
mock solemn, or they whistled and screamed.  
When she noticed their noise, she wondered,  
“Are they crazy?” She faced them  
and they fluttered off like a noisy chorus  
of birds disturbed, then everything dissolved  
into dreamy music she alone heard.

Everything was wonderfully restored,  
the way it used to be, as if  
returned to ask forgiveness for hurting her.  
Her face went dark for a while,  
her body writhed, remembering an ancient shame,  
she hesitated then, and then—  
with a broad sweeping gesture  
her hand extended pardon to all of it.

Voices rushed by, singing;  
a house she knew well loomed over her  
and bowed, lurched towards her like a faithful clumsy dog,  
its wooden steps creaked their familiar greeting,  
steps she'd once mounted, with legs weak as water,  
like someone summoned and scared,  
and she wondered, was he close?

Joy! He was so close—she recognized  
the subtle thud of the beloved footsteps  
and someone's eyes opened her like flowers,  
what a gift! She was dazzled, baffled.

Someone touched her, music filled the air,  
calling loudly to her, resonating all space  
like thunder, and she felt the storm  
go through her body, making her shake  
her shoulders and hips, hike her skirts,  
toss her head back in the noise of children  
and the tears of rain, slowly, grandly,  
she danced a salute to her ruined life.

## Gangster

He stands in the tenement entrance,  
a streetlight parts the darkness  
up the steps to where he's framed by the doorway  
like a saint in his niche.

Haloed by sodium-vapor beams  
of yellow street lamp light, his face is stone,  
his eyes are metal balls,  
shiny, accepting the reflection  
of all before them, without expression  
or memory. They take in the street,  
pedestrians, headlights from passing traffic,  
with the vacuum pull of utter emptiness.

He shifts his weight with a subtle shrug,  
feels the cool stiletto in his pocket,  
the street stands before him like a golden harp  
on which to play violent jazz.

## In the Dark Room

In the dark room everything stands anxious,  
like a watchdog.

You can hear in the furniture  
the whisper of leafy branches,  
the wind-borne sound of an axe-thud.

The walls re-echo a word they once muffled,  
then a child's sigh.

Lamplight plays on that shiny black monster,  
the piano—the wood almost hums.

Someone's finger points,  
glides over to where the drapes,  
like flightless wings, are drawn back from the mirror.  
Sorrow pours from all four walls  
like the gaze of the eyeless moon,  
weirdly visible,  
a determined yearning that evolves  
into something as definite  
as the too-heavy scent of the hyacinth.

A hand parts the curtains,  
a silhouette in the window,  
a woman's shadow.  
An armchair accepts her, she sinks into it,  
becomes nothing but the vase  
that holds a tall sad flower.

## The Maiden Says

1

If I were queen,  
and you my page,  
a slender, girlish youth,  
I'd be so beautiful, so untrue—

you'd walk behind me  
through silver morning mist,  
holding up the train of my dress  
sewn with pearls, you and my pet monkey,  
marching stiff and erect in your splendid resentment.

You'd have to be my chaperone  
when he arrived at a gallop,  
sudden as a summer storm,  
my eagle-like knight—

With magnificent hair  
set high, with gold-dust highlights,  
I'd bend forward, offer my soft pursed lips  
for his, with half-closed eyes,

half-closed, but open enough to see  
how your expression sharpened  
twitched in the green death of jealousy,  
to see your lips ashen with rage,  
If I were the queen  
and you my page.

No less than stones or whips,  
your words draw blood.

I close my eyes.

Suddenly I'm in a calm country,  
going along its wide bright roads.  
People stand silent in their doorways  
and bow as I pass.  
Huge white birds fly low,  
caress my shoulders with flutter of wings.

Angels approach, solemn, radiant,  
to lead me, pure and joyous, a martyr,  
triumphantly bloodied

I have only one dress,  
a cheap woolen one,  
so I dress myself up for my lover  
in the black velvet of sadness.

I've words, dreamy, lulling,  
glowing words, like a long row of pearls.

I really only have the one dress,  
of velvet-soft, velvet-black sadness.

## A Girl's Song

The charm of that time, unforgettable  
as a song that doesn't even need words,  
as a poem by Verlaine.

I'm afraid if I stop longing for you  
even for an instant, you'll be gone,  
like a broken spell, a dissipated charm.

The way your face looked:  
beautiful memory,  
elusive as petals pilfered by autumn wind.  
My trembling lips were red as a wound,  
violins sang, like a poet's dream,  
of love and death.

Our reflections in the ballroom's grand mirrors  
smiled back at us, looking so formal and fine;  
around your feet the train of my gown  
gently eddied

There's so much I want to give you, handsome man,  
Of love? Of death? Do I even know?  
Whatever it is, it lulls me, it bends me,  
a warm storm of longing,  
urging me to burn.



## What a Woman Says

Didn't you see it in his look, the way he moved?  
He's cruel with his own greatness,  
like a storm-born god.  
To him, the whole world's a tiny apartment  
in which he paces, vehement.

Yes, flames rise where he treads.  
I know. I'm the sad land he walks on,  
dark, exhausted earth.  
His tracks are scars. But once,  
  
once, I was the fairy-tale tower  
where, frightened by thunder, he hid.

## *Entr'acte*

The delicate texture  
of cool, amusing conversation  
trembled like a spiderweb  
at a puff of wind, then suddenly tore.

She, with an unperturbed smile of surprise  
felt his presence coming from behind  
in the unmistakable weight of the silence—  
the way you sense a wolf in the forest of a dream,  
golden eyes peering through fur,  
the high taut belly of a hungry predator,  
neck lowered, in line with the back,  
clawed toes fastening any terrain,  
the stalker's walk, in tightening circles,  
as if to spin the victim dizzy.

She, with an unperturbed smile of surprise  
watches, with a little thrill of dread and disgust,  
remembering the taste of wolf's blood  
filling her cheeks, bathing her teeth.  
Crouched down to spring,  
she looks at him with narrowed eyes  
as if lulled to sleep by his heat,  
draws herself slowly together, ready,  
picks up the delicate thread of cool,  
amusing conversation.

## On a Balcony

The image flickers back at me,  
from a long ago summer,  
late afternoon heat,  
a pair of petite, affectionate women  
leafing through an old album, laughing.  
Their hands touch, they let them, they leave them,  
they want this, they lean together,  
shoulder finds shoulder with a shudder of pleasure.  
The landscape beyond them is orange-red  
from the sunset of a thirsty day in August.  
They too thirst, the curves  
of their pale bodies blur.

Above them towers a powerful man,  
with the weighty grace that men possess,  
like a splendid, unnecessary decoration.

## My Venus

My Venus wears slippers of shimmering silk  
on her silken, shimmering feet;  
her lap is glorious  
as the purple confluence of an Iris's petals;  
her hips are broad, athletic,  
her hair pours, bronze, to her shoulders;  
a line of pearls, like a series of whispers  
matches the curve of her bosom  
like words set to music—  
they tremble ever so slightly to her heart-beat;  
her lips are pale and poetic,  
(pale with longing, poetic with melancholy),  
in her eyes, bright yet soft,  
lightning and fog,  
shadowed beneath her wide, black-feathered hat.

## Forgotten Gods

Zeus, Apollo, Pan  
and especially silver-sandaled Aphrodite  
who protects, who intoxicates the world,  
descended, unseen yet seen,  
unheard, yet heard, from Olympus—  
in endless, luminous appearances  
to generations that flamed and burn away,  
who kindled torches and set up temples  
never yet extinguished  
in the hearts of the loneliest,  
who still make sacrifices,  
and raise the smoke of adoring incense.

The world is deep and bright  
and the ancient wind still blows  
even through the youngest of leaves.  
I hear, with dread in my soul,  
the heavy tread of those forgotten gods.

## Her Smile

She smiles autumn light upon her world,  
light of autumn, cool and bright,  
a little weary, as one is when summer's done,  
a bright tired smile for the housework,  
for years under yoke to husband and child,  
for the everlasting small-talk of a shared life.

By day.

At night, packed away in sleep,  
her face becomes a stranger's.  
In her coarse linen night-gown  
she's dancing in a bar with soldiers and sailors,  
tossed as if by a storm, shoved and caught by hands.  
She drinks in their predatory stares;  
they look up at her, with their heavy, lowered heads,  
muscular and dumb as oxen.  
Feet stamp in the dance, elbows, shoulders pushing  
all around her, there's no room.  
This crowd's a little scary,  
teeth flash hunger, sink into own lips.  
Love runs hot in her blood,  
she hopes there'll be a fight, she's ready for something,  
for some ultimate thing,  
Love burns in her like a torch  
that gives off toxic smoke,  
bathes the way in weird blood-colored light.

There arises from the night,  
as if by some conjuration,  
a primitive town, a street, a hut,  
girls in a circle. She's in the middle,  
suntanned, pleased and at ease,

slowly she touches with red-nailed hands  
her friend's firm little breasts,  
lets them rest there, cups them,  
so thrilled she's ready to faint.  
She opens her eyes, it's painful to look,  
her face is turned to stone  
by the very real Medusa of this terrible pleasure,  
by the very real terror of rejection—

Like a wild, beautiful story you'd read  
and couldn't finish,  
because in the middle you remembered  
you're still behind bars in a legally sanctioned night,  
and the real secret of existence lies there hidden in your lap,  
which is where this story always has to end.  
That's how she saw her life—

or maybe, like a tall flame  
frozen in the midst of its golden dance,  
a flame that still gives light,  
like a dead, cold star, long after it's gone out,  
and everything is gray sky now  
over a gray and windy sea  
and sunset's tawdry reds and yellows  
only add to the sadness.

And so she walks, relieved of happiness,  
far on the ringing plains of windy joyless  
solitude, not even aware  
that someone's watching beside her.

To him, her face is a locked door  
which he's rightly afraid to open.  
So he waits, painfully, he waits.  
He kisses her brow, her soul awakens

on its gray echoing plain,  
her lips move, speak in a dream,  
her eyes slowly open  
and she smiles at her husband  
from far away.



## Under Chinese Lanterns

Beneath Chinese lanterns in an East Side restaurant,  
their silence speaks volumes—regrettably,  
only one page at a time;  
a multi-volume novel that doesn't have an ending.

Motionless, pale, and round,  
in the East Asian decor, they seem indeed  
like a pair of middle-aged Buddhas.

She glances at herself in the mirror  
and wonders how she'd look  
if some miracle lit her from within,  
if she became radiant, like the paper lanterns,  
if she could still be beautiful.  
“But you aren't beautiful,” states her reflection.  
She grins her humorless grin,  
looks at her hands, fans her fingers,  
notes the steady pulse of a tiny artery,  
then she stares at him,

the gray mask of patience he always wears,  
his weak little mouth with its weak little smile  
of guilt. But is it really his fault  
he is who he is? That he's no hero,  
or, as he would put it, not some goddamn knight?  
He's a working stiff, pays the bills  
for his kids and his shrewish wife.  
He could really use a vacation,  
he could really use to lose a few pounds.  
He's baffled. Where did the joy go?  
Maybe it was never there, or if it was,  
he can't remember when.

Is it really his fault  
if all he wants is to read his *Times*  
at breakfast with a piece of toast,  
have chicken for his dinner, have a little peace,  
now and then see friends as old as himself  
who remember funny sayings from twenty years ago?  
Is it really his fault if he closes his eyes  
and pretends he doesn't see the storm in her calm?

She narrows her eyes, she studies him  
with a tired expression. She actually hates him.  
He's disgusting. It's a good thing she's learned to keep quiet,  
patient as a rock. What else can she do?

Rip open old wounds, rake up the past,  
should they trade stares like crossed swords?  
The blades are rusty, too dull to even really cut.  
Instead, they let indifferent words fall  
which make the decorous clink of a teacup  
acknowledging its saucer, or a wedding ring  
placed on the dresser at night,  
the clink of a link  
that states the whole chain.

It's better than saying, "Look what you did,  
you ruined my life with your contemptible tenderness,  
with the touch of your weakling's hands,  
pathetic."

And yet, and yet, there was a time of joy,  
when love thrilled through them like the deep notes  
of a church organ, now and then rising  
to an austere baroque cry suggestive of death  
Didn't they exult in proving wrong  
the amused doom pronounced by friends

on the heat in the blood they took for love?  
That first "I love you" was a magic spell,  
a powerful conjuration uttered in thunder —

The waiter arrives like a last-minute pardon,  
"Would the lady care for coffee or tea?"

## Messenger of Sorrow

He:

Madame, it pains me to have to tell you  
something it cannot please you to hear.  
I come, an utter stranger, to trouble your ease.

She:

And if I should choose not to listen?

He:

I'd honor your wishes; actually, I'd thank you.  
Believe me please, I regret having to be  
sorrow's ambassador, but when one's closest friend  
is ill, and makes such a request—

She:

He's sick? You came because he wasn't able?  
Let's go—

He:

I want to say, and yet I hesitate,  
at a loss for how to say this at all.  
He doesn't want you to come.

She:

Oh!

He:

I realize that it would be presumptuous  
to offer any condolences;

*(here he bows deeply)*

is he really as sick as that? Perhaps.  
The illness is more in his will, his mind.  
He's tired to death, lies motionless,  
hour after hour, smiling that smile of his,  
half the smile of a mischievous faun,  
half that of sad Pierrot,  
that naive, tender smile that says so much to ladies

*(slyly)*

and promises so much more than he can give.

—I see I've hurt your feelings,  
forgive me, I implore you.

He lies there, unmoving for days,  
like one collapsed in the wake of a terrible trek,  
who can't, who won't, go one more step.  
Madame, at the risk of seeming insensitive,  
I shall simple repeat his words,

“She's too beautiful. Can you understand, my friend?  
Such beauty and such gloom—it's a burden,  
a precious, even a ceremonial burden,  
like a royal crown. But I'm no king,  
I'm really a very ordinary person.  
Don't laugh—but all I really long for  
are cheerful little things,

girls who dance with merry weightless grace,  
comic arias that make you shout “encore,”  
amusing novels with happy endings, and of course,  
young girls with artless charm, who say “no”  
but really mean “yes,” with a sly little grin.  
She’s too beautiful.”

He said this in all humility.

He’s one of what the Bible calls “the poor in spirit,”  
he doesn’t need “the kingdom of heaven.”  
In a spiritual sense—he simply can’t afford you.

He says, “I’m an idiot a thousand times over,  
I know, but all I can do is lie here  
puffing on this cigar which keeps going out;  
it’s not that I don’t see the irony in my situation,  
my not wanting what I so wanted.  
In fact, when I reflect, it worries me terribly.  
She’s going to hate me, I just know she will.”

You’re silent. Of course. You’re a proud woman,  
dignified, a statue made of ebony,  
or, better still, of bronze. I’ll be on my way,  
like a bad dream. You needn’t say a word.  
Your brave amazing silence is a fine reply,  
says everything. Look at you, noble,  
as a monument, only—my God, are you crying?  
I never thought I’d see a bronze statue weep.

# Last Words





## The Bridge

In the golden glare of day  
the Williamsburg bridge drowns;  
the wild heart of Manhattan  
beats pattering, gaspingly fast.

To the gold pallor of day  
the distant ferry boat adds its note of blue  
and the hoarse muted roar of traffic  
adds sound to the background  
like a dulling fever.

The day is weighty, like gold,  
and flashes like gold  
between the bridge's steel cables  
cast Manhattanwards like a net  
meant to capture happiness.

But happiness is not my concern,  
all I want is my sadness and my secret,  
I am my own bridge of gold  
to my own steel-built city.

## His Side of the Story

With the pale raindrops her words rain down,  
about the opera, someone's latest book of poems,  
about whether I love her.

A woman's voice is a beautiful thing,  
but it can grate.

My heart is at peace. My breath is a voice  
of the great silence. I'm a gray raindrop  
in a gray night, a tear falling silent  
into this abyss.

Through the pale rain her voice comes tearful and weak.  
Do I love her? I do, but I'm tired.  
So I don't love her, then? I'm not tired of you,  
I'm tired of love. Let me rest.

A woman's voice is a beautiful thing,  
but it can grate.

## Evening in the Park

This is the hour  
when time plays the quietest of flutes,  
when so much as a touch can wound.

Red glow of evening,  
the hour for passion, illumination, prayer.

My sister, young woman so slender,  
so nearly new,  
I remember what it was  
to be perfume, breeze, melody—

Now you give me that weary, lazy smile,  
I recognize that sad little tremor in your lip

in the hour when time plays the quietest of flutes.

But a man's face, like a mask of tragedy,  
follows me like a curse,  
at every step still there.

A cripple limping after me,  
as he has for years  
till I'm ashamed I can walk.

I'm manacled, both wrists pinched,  
between him, so close,  
and her, so far,  
and my chain's so taut  
through every unforgiving link  
that so much as a touch can wound,  
can make the metal cuffs bite in,

now, in the red glow of evening,  
when time plays the quietest of flutes.

*My days are like the roots . . .*

My days are like the roots  
of a tree that breaks through pavement,  
more obstinate than rock.

They grow, though every surge hurts  
as they shoulder stone, imperceptibly  
yet measurably lurching  
towards the pure, the spiritual blue.

With twisted, arthritic fingers  
the branches try to weave me a heaven  
out of that azure emptiness,  
a heaven over this silence  
which soon won't even be mine,

*I accept whatever . . .*

I accept whatever is darkest, hardest.  
Pain, hurt me the worst you can!  
My only drink is bitter truth:  
it doesn't make me drunk,  
but it does make me stagger.

The darkness, the hardness,  
the waste of my days—  
I acknowledge, to my shame,  
that the fire in my blood,  
fanned by every breath  
should somehow have transformed it  
into golden, alchemical poems.

Out of the darkest, heaviest, hardest,  
in obedience to a higher calling,  
I am building an impossible stairway,  
led by my longing,  
I'm building a stairway to the moon,  
to the luminous god of dreams.

*What did I really want?*

What did I really want? I'll tell you,  
you whom I made love me,  
whom I infuriated.

What was I waiting for on tiptoe all my life?  
It wasn't for love, not really.

I was waiting for some hint, a voice, a sign,  
pulse-present and star-far,  
I wanted to hear the joyous call  
you can only pretend you hear  
when your eyes are shut in prayer.

I did love this world, its cities,  
the crude simple gift of existence,  
and yes, my little sins were dear to me.  
I loved the honest hardness of truth,  
and yet, my whole life, I waited  
on tiptoe, for something else.

## Epitaph

*(engraved, at her request, on her gravestone)*

A woman like a marble statue,  
with breasts that shone with cold nobility,  
that masterpiece—consider those delicate hands!  
Her truly monumental beauty,  
she traded for tinsel, for nothing.

Maybe she wanted, maybe she lusted  
for her bad luck, may it's her own fault,  
she sought out all seven sorrows,  
a marble Mary, eyes gently closed  
in masochistic satisfaction,  
shamelessly displaying  
how her heart bristled swords,  
spilling the holy wine of poetry  
for tinsel, for nothing.

She's toppled now,  
the statue's face is cracked,  
her humiliated soul has escaped its cage.  
You who pass and pause by this grave,  
have this much pity: say nothing.





## About the Translator

*Mildred Faintly is a transgender woman who writes book reviews for the SF/Fantasy literary magazine 96thofOctober.com. She earned a doctorate in classics under another name in another life; this rendered her entirely unemployable and for some years not very good company. She finally found work as a high school math teacher, where she explained to parents the dispiriting facts of how numerical grades are averaged. In the classroom, her talents were more meaningfully brought into play deciding who really needed to use the bathroom, and inflating grades (those impromptu lessons in averages never really “took.”) Now retired, she is translating the sweetly melancholy poems of Li Qing Zhao, a brilliant and defiant woman of the Sung dynasty, and enjoying the life of a literary recluse in a bamboo grove somewhere in New Jersey.*